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Lazy Eyes – Robert Smithson and Cyprien Gaillard in Mexico

Matter, Charlotte

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Lazy Eyes

Robert Smithson
and Cyprien Gaillard
in Mexico

Charlotte
Matter

The scene of the film opens to a group of sunburnt youths, binge-drinking tequila in the middle of the day. Gathered on the lawn behind their all-inclusive resort, their eyes squinting from the afternoon's gleaming sun and lazy with the effects of alcohol, they do not seem the least bit interested in the actual Maya ruins nearby, whose pyramidal structures the hotel architecture mimics. One of them is on the verge of vomiting, but carries on regardless. There is no escape from this repulsive yet admittedly spellbinding spectacle, since the camera, and thus the viewer, is in the thick of it, surrounded by roaring kids. In the next sequence, a banner depicting the embattled Cleveland Indians logo—a racist caricature of a grinning face adorning a feather—swiftly appears against the blue sky, followed by close-up shots of dolphins at sunset. After the camera pans, it becomes clear that they are not swimming in the sea, but trapped in the pool of a hotel named Dreams Cancun^{fig. [1]}.

Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* (film still), 2009, 16 mm film, color, sound, 8 min. 52 sec. © the artist. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers/Bugada & Cargnel, Paris.

fig. [1]

A succession of hallucinatory sequences interrupted by cuts to black—like mental blanks—Cyprien Gaillard’s *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* (2009) assembles disjointed views of Mexico’s notorious beach holiday destination Cancún. In 1969, when the resort town was still a mere idea on the drawing boards of real estate investors, Robert Smithson already traveled to the Yucatán Peninsula and investigated sites of tourism, or rather their fringes. His trip resulted in a travelogue titled *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (published that same year in the September issue of *Artforum*) and in a lecture delivered at the University of Utah in 1972 that has come to be known as *Hotel Palenque*.

Putting the art historical genre of the travel account to the test, Smithson and Gaillard investigate, forty years apart, the conditions of being in, and looking at, a foreign land.¹ Both confront and confound different modes of looking at an “alien” place: the tourist’s glance, the artist’s perception, the ethnographer’s vision—all of them historically entangled with the colonizer’s “imperial eyes.”² Today more than ever, facing the rise of global populism and with the plan for an “impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful,

beautiful, southern border wall” between the US and Mexico being set in motion at the time of writing, the works of Smithson and Gaillard raise pressing issues.³ They urge the art historian to ask: How might lazy assumptions and hasty conclusions be countered by exploring other “ways of seeing”?⁴

Consider Smithson’s 1972 lecture, relating his visit to the former Maya city-state of Palenque to architecture students. Instead of presenting the famous archaeological site, picturesquely set in the jungle^{fig. [2]}, Smithson showed them photographs of the hotel where he stayed^{fig. [3]}. His slides offer various sights of this rather plain building, half-ruin and half-construction site, deliberately withholding a synoptic overview. Similarly, Gaillard’s *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* blurs any sense of orientation. Like a collection of indistinct recollections, his film feels like waking up with a tequila-induced hangover and being uncertain whether it was just a (bad) dream or reality. His images induce a feeling of claustrophobia very much

1 My comparison of these works is indebted to the exhibition *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan and Elsewhere* (curated by Pablo León de la Barra) at Museo Tamayo. See the exhibition catalogue of the same name, Mexico City, 2011.

2 On the production of “the rest of the world” in European travel writing, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed., London/New York, 2008.

3 Donald Trump’s immigration policy speech, Phoenix, Arizona, August 31, 2016.

4 The same year Smithson gave his *Hotel Palenque* lecture, John Berger published his seminal *Ways of Seeing*, London, 1972.



Casa No. 1.

Frederick Catherwood, Casa No. 1 (Palenque),
in: John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America,
Chiapas and Yucatan* [1841], reprint, vol. 2, New York, 1969, p. 338.

fig. [2]



Reproductions of Robert Palenque's photographs
hanging inside Hotel Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico.
Photo by the author, July 2016.

fig. [3]

opposed to the idea of traveling the world—a sense of being trapped, like the captive dolphins, in the realm of resorts and never-ending inebriation from one sequence to the next, despite the immediate proximity of the ocean’s endless vastness.⁵

By taking hotels as points of departure, Smithson and Gaillard critically address their own stance, making evident their transient position as passing-by travelers. Since they are foreign visitors, their gaze is unavoidably entangled with the colonial past that continues to inform the present. More specifically, both address the complex liaison between Mexico and the United States. In the case of Smithson, this topic obviously transpires through his own nationality, and in the case of Gaillard, by way of the subjects he chooses to depict: the spring breakers, the Cleveland Indians banner, or the collapsing building in yet another sequence, adorning the sign of a Texan contractor named Dallas Demolition—a reference to US territory that used to be Mexican^{fig. [4]}. Gaillard’s work invokes the gaze of the tourist as the brutal manifestation of an industry perpetuating the social injustices and ecological destruction



Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* (film still), 2009, 16 mm film, color, with sound, 8 min. 52 sec. © the artist. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers/Bugada & Cargnel, Paris.

fig. [4]

⁵ Even though Cancún owes its attraction to the “pervasive liquidity of its landscape,” a vast majority of tourists prefer the hotel pool to the ocean. Fernando Martí, *Cancún: Paradise Invented—Notes on Landscape and Architecture*, Mexico City, 1998, pp. 46–48.

initiated by colonialism. Cancún is furthermore referred to as *Gringolandia* by locals, a term that not only qualifies it as the product of “Disneyfication”⁶ but also “implies the invasion and expropriation of Mexican space by an American place.”⁷

Ever since the beginning of Meso-american archaeology and its popular, often fantastical, accounts in the late nineteenth century, Mexico has attracted artists “in search of a timeless utopia south of the border.”⁸ This incapacity or unwillingness to see Mexico in the present resonates in Smithson’s and Gaillard’s works, which address the idea of travel not merely as a relocation through space, but also as a mental journey through time, alluding to time warps where the distant past of the Maya meets with an uncertain future.

Several authors have detailed Smithson’s manifest interest in science fiction.⁹ The looped music in Gaillard’s film, on the other hand, is taken from *The Mysterious Cities of Gold*, a 1980s French-Japanese animated television series that narrates the search for El Dorado and fuses Latin America’s colonial past with mystical elements. Gaillard thus reflects his own extraneous view by appropriating this hypnotic melody and relating the hallucinating gaze of the conquistador with the inebriated tourist’s eye. The idea of temporal shifts further filters through his use of an anachronistic medium to capture today’s Cancún. Lurking beneath the surface of the seemingly nostalgic 16-mm shots, amplified by the eerie music mimicking deep-sea echolocation signals, one can only find distress and discomfort. The poignant beauty of the images, in sharp contrast to their content, provides an unexpected, indeed provocative, way of seeing an overbuilt mass tourism destination widely considered a failure.

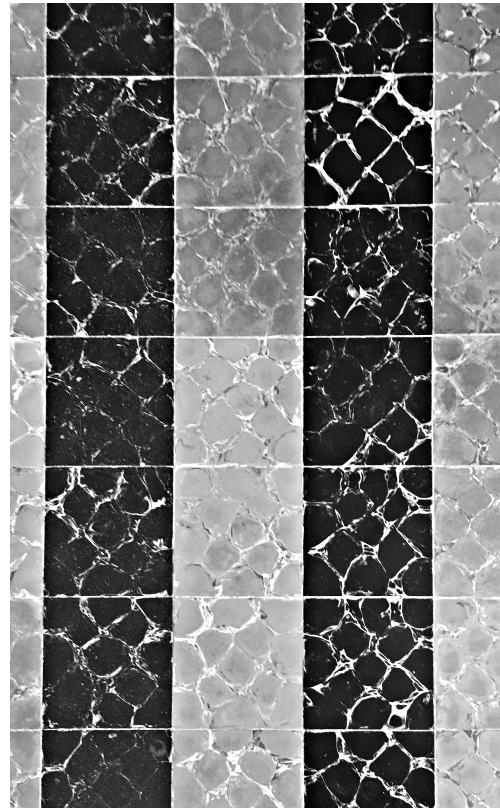
6 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London, 1976, p. 95.

7 Rebecca Maria Torres and Janet D. Momsen, “Gringolandia: The Construction of a New Tourist Space in Mexico,” in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95.2, June 2005, pp. 314–335, p. 314.

8 James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914–1947*, Washington/London, 1993, p. 55.

9 See, for instance, Eugenie Tsai, “The Sci-fi Connection: The IG, J. G. Ballard, and Robert Smithson,” in: Brian Wallis and Thomas Finkelpearl (eds.), *This is Tomorrow Today: The Independent Group and British Pop Art*, New York, 1987, pp. 71–75.

In an essay on artists' travels, Bärbel Küster notes that "each new era brings a refocusing of the lens through which the experience of foreign countries and objects is viewed."¹⁰ It might be safe to say that Smithson and Gaillard operate within not-so-remote, yet decidedly altered, contexts in political, artistic, and epistemic terms, and indeed frame differently their views of Mexico. Gaillard's immersive point of view—amidst the spring breakers, inside the pool—is firmly embedded within the age of global mass travel he takes on as his subject. By comparison, Smithson visited the Yucatán at a time when it was still considered a "wild" and remote area, and his trip coincided with the apex of space exploration (the year of the moon landing). His deadpan presentation arguably reflects a general feeling of estrangement; Philip Ursprung understands it as a double-edged comment challenging the discourse monopoly of Minimal and Conceptual art ^{fig. [5]}.¹¹ Yet Smithson's sardonic mode also perpetuates a condescending attitude toward Mexico. Take his reiterated invocations



View of the floor tiles at Hotel Palenque described by Smithson as "much more interesting than most of the paintings being done in New York City right now." See the lecture's transcript in: *Parkeff* 43, 1995, p. 121. Photo by the author, July 2016.

fig. [5]

¹⁰ Bärbel Küster, "The Traveling Gaze: Notes on Artists' Travels," in: Johann Holten (ed.), *Room Service: On the Hotel in the Arts and Artists in the Hotel*, exh. cat. Baden-Baden, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Köln, 2014, pp. 46–59, p. 48.

¹¹ Philip Ursprung, "Robert Smithson's Hotel Palenque," in: *Daidalos* 62, Dec. 1996, pp. 148–153, p. 151.

of the “unconscious, dangerous violence that is really lurking in every patch of earth.”¹² Certainly his analogy between the hotel pool and ancient human sacrifice must be read ironically—still, he is drawing menacingly close to neocolonial, primitivist attitudes when conjuring up “all sorts of truths about the Mexican temperament,” commenting on the “Mexican dirt” and depicting the “broken look” of a building that has “no logic at all, whatsoever.”

Accordingly, Smithson repeatedly employs a vocabulary suggesting disease in his *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, echoing the persistent conception of the Yucatán Peninsula as land that is inhospitable because of its suffocating climate, devastating hurricanes, hostile vegetation, and recurring plagues. Smithson, for instance, describes how, “The eyes, being infected by all kinds of nameless tropisms, couldn’t see straight.”¹³ What is more, the title of his travelogue obviously alludes to John Lloyd Stephens’ popular expedition narrative *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843), which includes, early on, a rather violent description of

a new corrective procedure for a misalignment of the eyes carried out by a Boston surgeon on the Yucatec people.¹⁴ Commenting on Stephens’ repeated insinuations of slothfulness as characteristic of “Indians,” Jennifer L. Roberts argues that strabismus, also known as “lazy eye,” can be made to signify not only a visual, but also a cultural disorder.¹⁵ On the other hand, being cross-eyed was considered a feature of beauty in Mayan culture, and even deliberately induced in infants, as recorded in the late sixteenth century by the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa.¹⁶

¹² See the lecture’s transcript, first published as “Insert: Robert Smithson. Hotel Palenque, 1969–72,” in: *Parkett* 43, March 1995, pp. 117–132.

¹³ Robert Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” in: *Artforum* 8.1, Sept. 1969, pp. 28–33, p. 32.

¹⁴ See John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* [1843], reprint, vol. 1, New York, 1963, pp. 58–64. Smithson owned a copy of this edition; see the catalogue of his library in: Jane Hyun (ed.), *Robert Smithson*, exh. cat. Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Berkeley/London, 2004, pp. 249–263.

¹⁵ Jennifer L. Roberts, “Landscapes of Indifference: Robert Smithson and John Lloyd Stephens in Yucatán,” in: *The Art Bulletin* 82.3, Sept. 2000, pp. 544–567, pp. 548–550.

¹⁶ Diego de Landa, *Relation des choses de Yucatan*, trans. Brasseur de Bourbourg, Paris, 1864, pp. 113–115.

Taking into account these multiple meanings, and returning to Smithson's and Gaillard's own cross-eyed views of Mexico, the notion of lazy eyes becomes intriguing as an alternative mode of looking. It might, for instance, be interesting to ask, in the words of Smithson, "Why not reconstruct one's inability to see?" although the aloof "anti-vision" he proposes seems too cynically distanced for an art historian today.¹⁷

Gaillard's comparable thought of looking at architecture drunk, or hungover, posits a polemic, yet compelling, twist on this idea: According to him, the intoxicated condition not only allows one to decelerate and focus, but also to personally relate to the contemplated spaces and objects.¹⁸ Likewise, the dolphins swimming in the Cancún hotel pool suggest such an immersed perspective. Alluding to a place commonly dismissed as postmodern simulacrum, they furthermore point to the artificiality of the stranger's gaze itself. In other words, thinking about, and perhaps through, lazy eyes might help to undermine the idealized and imperialistic concept of a singular comprehensive, totalistic view. Far from indolent, this perspective ultimately serves to grasp the unavoidable deficiencies of every single gaze by embracing plural, "contaminated" ways of seeing as a timely approach for thinking and writing about art. ●

¹⁷ Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," p. 32.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Gaillard's conversation with Susanne Pfeffer, in: *Cyprien Gaillard: The Recovery of Discovery*, exh. cat. Berlin, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Köln, 2012, pp. 33–49, p. 45.